

Report

Little River Canyon National Preserve

■ 1.0 Site Description

Sign for Canyon Rim Scenic Drive



View from Canyon Overlook



The Little River Canyon National Preserve (the Preserve) is located in northeast Alabama in Cherokee and DeKalb Counties, east of Fort Payne, Alabama. The Preserve is within a two- to three-hour drive of Birmingham, Alabama; Atlanta, Georgia; and other major metropolitan areas in both states. The Preserve was established as a unit of the NPS by Public Law 102-427 on October 21, 1992. The 14,000-acre Preserve (approximately 10,338 acres are federal and 3,662 acres are state-owned) contains an example of an Appalachian Plateau Province canyon system. The Preserve is biologically diverse and home to a number of rare plants and animals.

In early 1997, the Alabama Environmental Council named the Little River Canyon one of Alabama's top 10 natural wonders. Forested uplands, waterfalls, canyon rims and bluffs, stream riffles and pools, boulders, and sandstone cliffs offer settings for a variety of recreational activities. Recreational pursuits range from the simple and passive to the extremely challenging. The 23-mile Canyon Rim Drive provides easy access to scenic views. The DeSoto State Park, a popular and major regional recreational park at the Preserve's northern boundary, operates overnight and offers food service facilities inside the boundary of the Preserve.

The major access roads into the Preserve include I-59, Alabama State Routes 35, 89, 176 and 275. State Route 89 is the major access to the DeSoto State Park. It also intersects State Route 35, which is the major access road to the Preserve (see Figure 1). Route 35 crosses the Preserve near Little River Falls where visitor facilities and a 50-vehicle parking lot is located. State Route 176 is a 23-mile scenic drive that begins at the junction of Route 35. Other than a network of dirt and gravel roads, there are no paved roads to points north and east of Route 35 inside the Preserve boundary.

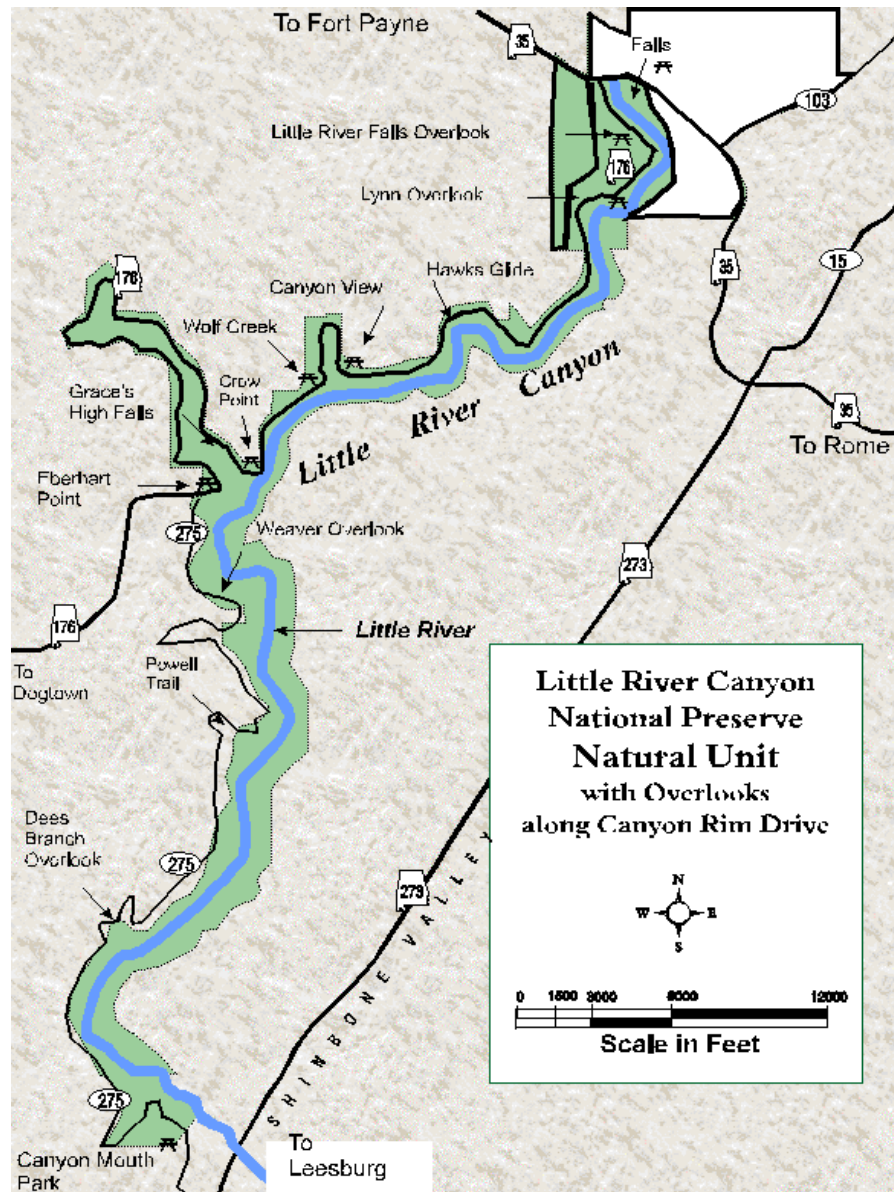
Figure 1. Location of Little River Canyon National Preserve



Visitor activities and destinations are dispersed throughout the Preserve. The primary visitor destinations include:

- **The Little River Falls** – (near the Route 35 junction) has a 50-vehicle parking lot. Traditional use of the canyon includes viewing/sightseeing, hiking, and picnicking.
- **The Canyon Rim Scenic Drive** – The scenic drive starts at the top of the Lookout Mountain and ends at Canyon Mouth Park. It is approximately 23 miles and takes about one to two hours to complete by car (see Figure 2). From this point, a narrower, winding, county road continues along the rim to the canyon mouth. The rim drive is primarily within the Preserve boundary, but there are sections where the road is outside the Preserve. Along the rim drive are a number of overlooks offering views of the canyon. Visitor use of the drive and overlooks represents the most significant activity in the Preserve.

Figure 2. Location of the River Canyon Rim Drive



- **The Canyon Mouth Park** – This is a 130-acre day-use area at the end of the River. The parking lot can accommodate approximately 100 cars (see Figure 3). It is accessible from Route 273/279. This is a popular local recreational area that accommodates picnicking, hiking, wading, white water paddling, canoeing, mountain biking, and horse-back riding. Fishing and trapping are permitted in designated areas.

Figure 3. Canyon Mouth Parking Area



There are also other points north and east of Route 35 (within the Preserve boundary) for hunting, rock climbing, and hiking. Currently, there is not an accurate estimate of annual Preserve visitation. (The Little River Canyon National Preserve is not required to report visitation statistics to the Denver Service Center. Visitation statistics have traditionally been estimated based on the visitation of the DeSoto State Park.) With only visitor statistics for the DeSoto State Park and hunting activities in the wildlife management area, a rough estimate of current annual Preserve visitation is approximately 375,000 persons. This figure is estimated to increase to around 500,000 persons by 2010. The growth is expected to consist mainly of persons visiting from outside of the local area.

Visitation is primarily between April and October and is highest between April and June, and September and October. This corresponds to different seasonal recreational activities such as hunting, white water rafting and kayaking in the winter, and hiking and picnicking in the spring and summer. Visitation is lowest in January. The Preserve has a regional draw, with visitors mainly coming from points north and east from the states of Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, Georgia, and the Carolinas. Summer visitors are typically tourists, and winter visitors are primarily local residents.

The primary transportation issues include the need for roadway improvements to Routes 176 and 35 and the potential construction of a new highway immediately south of the Preserve. This proposed highway might potentially increase visitation and improve visitor access to the Preserve. The Preserve is in the process of seeking Federal Lands Highway funding to repave and improve portions of Route 176 and to designate the route as a National Scenic Byway. There are also plans to improve portions of Route 35. While Route 35 crosses the Preserve and is only within the Preserve for approximately one mile, it is the Preserve's primary access route for local users and tourists. Route 35 also carries high-speed auto and truck traffic through the Preserve near the popular Little River Falls area. Future plans are also being developed to widen Route 35 to four lanes and construct a new bridge over Little River immediately north of the existing bridge.

Finally, there is also a proposal to construct a new facility from Atlanta to Memphis. This new highway is proposed to be located immediately south of the Preserve. If the proposed highway were constructed, it would provide better access to the Preserve and potentially help increase patronage to the Preserve.

■ 2.0 Existing ATS

There are no existing Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) or any direct public transit service to the Preserve. All visitors use private automobiles to access the Preserve.

■ 3.0 ATS Needs

There does not appear to be any need for an ATS in the near future. Since the access roads are rarely congested, and the current availability of parking can handle vehicular demand, (except for rare occasions), there is no incentive for visitors to use transit. Furthermore, as a result of the dispersed types of activities and destinations within the 14,000-acre Preserve, visitors will continue to drive their private automobiles.

However, if visitation increases in the future to a point where frequent congestion occurs at the Canyon Rim Road or if parking demand increases beyond the available supply at various destinations, there may be the need for some form of ATS shuttle bus system. A logical alternative is to implement a shuttle bus staging facility at either (or both) the Little River Falls parking area and/or the Canyon Mouth Park. The shuttle bus could use small eight- to 12-passenger vans and start at one end and provide access to points along the 23-mile scenic drive. This service could be designed to serve peak demand periods when the parking area(s) are operating at or over capacity and could also be expanded as travel demand warrants.

■ 4.0 Basis for ATS Needs

There is no basis for any short-term ATS needs. However, as visitation increases, there may be a need for implementation of a long-term ATS solution. An effective ATS may be implemented to reduce the need to expand parking facilities at the Little River Falls, the Canyon Mouth Park, as well as along the Canyon Rim Scenic Drive. Furthermore, if the Route 35 improvements and the major highway (south of the Preserve) are constructed then increases in traffic, congestion, and visitation into the Preserve may occur. As a result, increased visitation and parking shortages may warrant some form of ATS application in the future.

■ 5.0 Bibliography

Little River Canyon National Preserve. *Draft General Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement Little River Canyon National Preserve*. Little River Canyon National Preserve, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1999.

Little River Canyon National Preserve Web site (<http://www.nps.gov/liri/>).

■ 6.0 Persons Interviewed

Bill Springer, superintendent, Little River Canyon National Preserve